

## ESTABLISHING A FOCAL POINT FOR FLOOD PREPAREDNESS

## INTRODUCTION

The establishment of a permanent focal point for flood preparedness and emergency response requires careful consideration. Planners must first define the elements of the total response and the systems necessary to implement the various preparedness plans before selecting the ministry or office where the focal point will be established. It is also important to consider the implications of locating the management function in various offices.

## CONSIDERATIONS

It should be recognized that no single ministry or agency can effectively implement all the elements of a complete disaster preparedness program. It should also be recognized that in the course of preparing for and responding to a flood emergency, the type of inputs required change substantially. As the emergency evolves through its phases, the needs and types of inputs change as follows:

## The Pre-Disaster (Preparedness) Phase:

Planning: Initially, flood preparedness is a planning function. The preparedness agency carries out a wide variety of studies, develops implementing arrangements, and focuses on overall management concerns.

Technical inputs: As soon as the overall plans have been defined, there will be a flurry of technical inputs centered around the flood warning system. These will include flood warning, computerization of critical data, and development of a geographic information system (GIS) based emergency information system.

## The Emergency Phase:

Operational inputs: During an actual emergency, operational considerations become predominant. Flood fighting, evacuation, search and rescue, support of evacuees and isolated populations require management by an agency with established internal communications, strong logistics capabilities, and the ability to mobilize and support a wide range of heavy equipment simultaneously throughout the affected areas.

Relief inputs: During and immediately after the emergency, the inputs change to social and humanitarian. The survivors require a wide range of temporary support ranging from food and shelter to short term economic assistance. The agency in charge at this point will need to coordinate and work through a variety of social service organizations, both government and non-governmental.

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## The Post-Disaster Phase:

**Reconstruction:** During the reconstruction period, economic assistance takes precedence. Programmes must be developed to provide a wide range of loans and grants to the affected populations in all major sectors such as housing, agriculture, small enterprises, medium and large enterprises, etc. Coordination with lending institutions and the sectoral ministries is a prime requirement and the authority in charge must have strong capabilities to undertake a variety of economic analyses.

From the above, it should be apparent that it would be very difficult to create one ministry with comprehensive emergency management functions; that emergency preparedness is a function of many ministries, departments, and agencies. It can also be seen that the overriding need is for a focal point to coordinate the full range of preparedness and response activities and integrate them into plans for each phase of an emergency.

## OPTIONS

The following ministries or offices are usually considered for locating the central emergency preparedness and management authority:

- president or prime minister's office;
- vice president's office;
- public works ministry
- ministry of irrigation or water resources
- ministry of interior
- ministry of local government and regional development
- ministry of defence
- ministry of housing and urban development

In some countries the government may have a special relief ministry or commission which may also be considered.

If flooding is regionalized or if a decentralized plan is being developed, provincial, district, or subdistrict governmental units may be considered.

## Discussion:

As a general principle, emergency management should remain in the hands of civilian authorities. This is not to say that the military does not have an important role to play, but the limitations of the military in meeting civil needs is important to recognize. The fact that the military becomes involved so often is because during an emergency their communications and logistics capabilities are often invaluable. The objective therefore should be to develop an effective role for the military based on these capabilities without surrendering total authority or control over to the defense ministry.

The fact that so many ministries and government agencies will need to be involved argues for the coordinating function to be placed at a fairly high level in government. Some argue that the function should be established in the office of the chief executive. The rationale is that since ministries (and therefore ministers) need to be coordinated and given directions, the authority to do so must be placed near the seat of power. As a result of bureaucratic realities, however, there are strong arguments against this choice. The head of the preparedness office is rarely as senior or as powerful as the ministers he must coordinate and eventually, the ministers and the secretaries of their ministries will come to resent the preparedness office's closeness to the chief executive and even create obstacles and obstruction to their work. (See Box 1.)

Locating the preparedness office in a strong line ministry is generally considered the best choice. Not only does the office and its functions become less threatening to other powerful ministers and secretaries, the office has a strong official to defend it, to propose and support its budget, and to protect it from bureaucratic infighting. Bureaucratically, this arrangement puts preparedness at a level just below that of ministry secretary -- high enough where coordination is meaningful, but low enough to remove it from most, but never all, political infighting.

Some countries, recognizing the difficulty of putting all emergency functions under one office split the functions among two or three agencies, usually according to pre- and post-disaster phases. For example, under such an arrangement the Water and Irrigation Ministry might be in charge of flood forecasting and warning, an office in the Public Works Ministry might be in control of evacuation, search and rescue, and post disaster assessment; while the ministry of local government would be in charge of reconstruction planning and relief.

A final model that some countries have adopted, though usually as an interim solution, is to form a national flood committee made up of ministers and/or secretaries of the major ministries involved in flood preparedness and response and to provide the committee with a full-time, professional secretariat. The secretariat staff may be professionals specifically hired as emergency management staff or more commonly, a small permanent staff is hired and other personnel are seconded from the line ministries. (See Box 2.)

ADAPTING TO BUREAUCRATIC REALITIES:  
JAMAICA'S OFFICE OF DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

After a series of devastating floods in western Jamaica in 1979, and recognizing the threat to the country from hurricanes, the government decided to form an Office of Disaster Preparedness and Emergency Relief Coordination (ODP). Acting on advice from several major donors, ODP was placed in the Prime Minister's office. The reasoning was that coordination of ministries would require the coordinator to be at a level in government. Since the only office higher than Minister was Prime Minister, it did not seem unreasonable that his office would be the best place. A very capable technical person was selected to head the ODP and the staff were soon housed in a building immediately adjacent to the Prime Minister's offices.

It first became apparent that there was a problem when it came time to submit ODP's budget. The Prime Minister, who remained distant from the normal day-to-day work of the office, was not in a position to defend the amounts requested and ODP's budget was severely reduced.

The ODP staff began to encounter difficulties with the ministries they were to coordinate. In some cases ministry staff objected to extra demands from an outside agency, but worse, some ministers resented what they perceived as "junior staff issuing instructions in the name of the PM". The ODP staff were seen as upstarts -- people who had obtained power without the requisite seniority. As time went on, the ministries were not only generally uncooperative, in some cases they went out of their way to create obstacles.

Luckily, the Director of ODP saw what was happening. He approached the Secretary of the Ministry of Housing and Public Works and suggested that ODP be moved into the PWD. Public Works was a powerful ministry; it controlled resources invaluable in an emergency, such as trucks and heavy equipment. It had boats, and most important, its own internal communications system. As part of the housing ministry, it worked closely with provincial and local governments and urban and rural housing agencies. There were also some administrative advantages -- rather than fight for clerical support, vehicles and other equipment, ODP's requests were lumped into the overall PWD budget and were passed without much debate. And having one of the most powerful permanent secretaries, not to mention a very influential minister, didn't hurt.

Bureaucratically, the transfer removed some of the obstacles to effective day-to-day coordination. Relations with other ministries were carried out on a "horizontal" not "vertical" basis, i.e., by staff of equal rank. While some territorial issues occasionally arose, for the most part they were easy to overcome.

To enhance ODP's emergency management function, a National Disaster Committee was formed. The ministers on the committee made policy while their permanent secretaries coordinated operations. The prime minister chaired the committee while the ODP director served as secretary and chief of the emergency staff.

In 1988 Hurricane Gilbert struck Jamaica. Despite extensive damage, all agreed that ODP had prepared the country well and had done an excellent job in coordinating emergency operations.

MEXICO'S OFFICE OF EMERGENCY RESPONSE:  
THE CORE STAFF APPROACH

In 1976, Mexico formed the Office of Emergency Response. The new director's instructions were to minimize the hiring of new staff and to maximize coordination and participation of all the ministries. The way in which he went about creating the office is considered an imaginative approach to establishing a disaster preparedness agency.

First, to provide policy guidance in an emergency, a national emergency committee was formed of the senior ministers and the chiefs of staff of the army and air force (the two services most needed in a major emergency). Several seats were left vacant so the president could appoint his personal representatives. The president presided; in his absence, the Secretary of Public Works chaired the meetings. The disaster management office was designated as the secretariat of the committee. During normal periods, it was to be housed in the public works ministry.

The most innovative feature of the office was the way in which it was staffed. The director chose what he called a "core staff" approach. In other words, only the director and a few administrative staff were hired as permanent staff, all other personnel were seconded on one or two year assignments. The deputies were senior personnel from the line ministries. Technical staff were generally given longer assignments than administrative staff.

This arrangement had several major advantages. First, all ministries had significant inputs to the formulation of disaster plans. While on secondment, personnel learned about the plans and how they worked, and could often make suggestions that improved coordination with their ministries. They were able to form integrated work teams that formed the basis for expanded task forces during emergencies.

When the personnel went back to their ministries at the conclusion of their assignment, they became the links between their ministry and the disaster office. Therefore, coordination was made even more effective.

Getting staff seconded to the agency proved to be easier than had been expected: for some it was a chance to try something different while for others it was seen as a chance to demonstrate an ability to work at an interministerial level -- and thereby enhance one's promotional chances. This latter motive was so strong that eventually, the office was able to insist that only high level administrative staff be seconded, ones who were on a career track that would eventually make them eligible for consideration as the senior civil servant in their ministry.

Finally, the core staff approach had one other advantage: it was a relatively cheap way to staff the agency. In a country faced with a need for austerity, this administrative arrangement is worth considering.